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When Disasters Strike

An Interview by Linda Silka

with Joyce Rumery and Tom Abbott

Libraries probably are not the first thing we think of when disasters strike. Yet, high-visibility disasters in recent years—such as Hurricane Katrina—have heightened the visibility of disasters’ impacts on libraries and the communities in which they are located. These calamities raise questions about how libraries can prepare for disasters and also show the ways that libraries are being pressed into service as places for community gathering and refuge when disasters strike. The impact of disasters and the importance of preparing for them were brought home to Tom Abbott, Dean of Libraries and Distance Learning, University of Maine Augusta, and Joyce Rumery, Dean of the Fogler Library, University of Maine, when they participated in the American Library Association’s annual meeting in New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. The interview here provides their reflections on what they experienced during that time, and what we can learn about libraries and disaster planning from those experiences.

What is the typical ALA convention like and how was the post-Katrina New Orleans annual meeting different?

Tom: The American Library Association’s annual convention is the largest gathering of its kind in the world. Typically, something on the order of 25,000 librarians representing all types of libraries attend the convention. Imagine if you will, that number of people descending on a community devastated by a recent disaster. Most of the New Orleans libraries were closed and many lay in ruins. Most of the librarians had been laid off. We couldn’t simply come and hold our usual meetings and pretend as if the devastation around us

didn’t exist. We needed to get involved and think about what this meant.

An important volunteering opportunity was made available allowing librarians attending the convention could help with New Orleans library cleanup. For two days we did this. More than 900 volunteers (all wearing identical bright yellow T-shirts) were bused to 20 sites on two different days. The equivalent of three and a half years of work was done over those two days in devastated neighborhoods.

Joyce and I helped with cleanup on the library grounds of a branch library. The grounds were littered with dangerous debris such as broken window glass and there was clothing still stuck in the “hurricane” fence behind the library. You might be wondering why a focus would be placed on the cleaning up the grounds. Here is where one sees the physical and virtual roles of libraries collide. In this library branch (as in some others), even as the building itself could not yet be made ready for use by patrons, community access to the Internet was quickly made functional and became a primary access point for users to make contact with the outside world—to contact FEMA, to contact insurers, and to contact family—and so it was important that the library grounds where people would use the “virtual” library were safe and even welcoming in a sea of devastation.

What kinds of things did this make you think about in terms of Maine’s libraries and disaster planning?

Tom: Hurricane Katrina brings home the message (as does Hurricane Sandy) of the risks that libraries face. We have to hope that Maine never faces such devastation. In many ways, what really got us to thinking about disasters was not hurricanes but Maine’s ice storm of a decade ago. The ice storm was a wakeup call that made us think about what we need to do in Maine so that our libraries are prepared. At UMaine Augusta, for example, we lost our power for multiple days. Had the cold been more extreme during the ice storm, the loss of power could have been disastrous (for example, pipes freezing). As it was, it helped us to see that we need plans that include alternative power (we now have generators) and disaster-planning kits. People sometimes laugh when they hear what our disaster kit

consists of, a low-tech box with a blue tarp and a few other essentials that we keep on the library's second floor to help us on the not infrequent occasions when water pipes leak onto our books and materials. Yet, having the kit in place serves as a reminder that we need to be vigilant for impending problems.

Joyce: Disasters can come in many forms. Because libraries house so much paper materials, one of the most disastrous things can be mold that results from water damage: from flooding, bursting pipes, and leaking roofs. When we have a “water event,” the most immediate step we need to take as a library is not to try to do the impossible and dry all the books, but rather to call in the freezer trucks (yes there are such things). They come and take our materials and keep them at a low temperature until they can be dried. This keeps mold from growing. When we were in New Orleans, Tom took photos of some of the books on shelves in the New Orleans libraries. The books were green with mold—they would not be able to be saved. Mold is so dangerous to the contents of libraries that we often find that we are unable to accept donations of books—sometimes rare books—because they have started to grow mold as a result of having been kept in attics of people's homes sometimes for decades.

Water can be so destructive that some libraries avoid using water in their sprinkler systems altogether and instead have gas emergency systems. These certainly have their own downside, but they avoid the calamity of water destroying paper-based resources.

You have mentioned disasters that affect the physical materials in libraries. As libraries become online information centers, are there additional “disasters” that you now have to worry about?

Joyce: Disasters (and potential disasters) do indeed come in different forms. All libraries now have new concerns about maintaining the safety of their collections in the face of technological dangers. As librarians, we are having to learn about these new dangers and how to ensure that our collections remain uncompromised. The UMaine Fogler Library, like many libraries, maintains multiple backup servers to prepare for the many contingencies where a single server that many

patrons depend upon might go down. We need to build into our budgets recognition of the need for multiple “vehicles” for ensuring that access to online journals, books, and other resources will not be lost.

We also have to be increasingly vigilant for hackers. Librarians in the U.S. estimate that something on the order of half a million digital attacks a day are made on libraries. These attacks are attempts to get at and download a library's digital resources—journals and the like—without paying for them. Libraries can lose their license to subscribe to particular journals if they do not have in place effective (and expensive) systems to find and stop hacker attacks. And these attacks are increasingly sophisticated. For university libraries they often come during school breaks and other times when hackers may assume that there are fewer people working to keep library resources safe. All of this means that librarians must keep adding new skills to stay abreast of the various forms of disasters that can confront a library that has both paper-based and virtual resources.

Are there other ways that libraries prepare for disasters?

Joyce: As physical spaces libraries often have a special role to play in disasters. We saw this with Hurricane Katrina, where the libraries were gathering places for the community when most other public (and many private) spaces were uninhabitable. Libraries are places where people can come, be safe, and access resources. UMaine's Fogler Library, for example, is now designated as an essential service. This means that we stay open in the event of the university's closing because of an impending storm or other significant problem. Like many other libraries, we are exploring the implications of this role and how we can serve as a refuge and place of safety. What kind of training do we need to be prepared for assisting our community in the event of a disaster?

And what if the disaster is not weather related but is of the human sort? Libraries are public spaces open to all. This characteristic of libraries is highly prized. But how as libraries do we prepare for the low but not zero probability of something like a hostage situation, or a bomb threat, or other violent act? In our disaster planning, we are not merely trying to attend to the

possibility of calamitous floods or snowstorms or hurricanes; instead, we are also working to prepare for all other eventualities. This might sound far afield from books and journals and readership, but if libraries are to continue to play a central role in their communities, then we must all give thought to new ways to ensure that they remain viable in the face of the diverse challenges and threats they may face. 🐼



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Joyce Rumery is dean of university libraries at the University of Maine. She has been with the university for 26 years and dean since 2005. She is the vice chair of the Maine Library Commission, serves on the Maine InfoNet Board, is a member of the Maine Library Association Executive Council, and chairs the URSUS library directors meetings.



Thomas (Tom) Abbott is dean of libraries and distance learning, at the University of Maine, Augusta, where he has worked since 1974 in a variety of administrative positions. Abbott also provides leadership for

UMA's accreditation processes and supports the provost in a variety of project work.